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ABSTRACT

The Student Learning Imperative (SLI) was created to stimulate discussion on how student affairs professionals can enhance student learning and personal development. This paper outlines the antecedents and background of the SLI position paper. A member of the committee that developed the SLI discusses here student affairs' historical goal of reunifying the extracurriculum and the curriculum into an educational paradigm that sees student learning as occurring both in and out of the formal classroom. This overview presents the SLI as a recent attempt to emphasize this enhanced view of the nature of collegiate learning. After outlining the rhythmic changes in higher education over the past 100 years, the paper lists the principles of SLI, such as the integration of learning, personal development, and student development; the importance of knowledge and understanding to student success; and the recognition of student affairs personnel as educators. The SLI is seen as an attempt to reunify the academic and the out-of-class activities of students so that, as faculty and staff plan the scope and nature of student learning, the full resources of a university can be utilized in implementing its mission statement. (NJM)

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Understanding ACPA's Student Learning Imperative

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Abstract

This paper outlines the antecedents and background of the Student Learning Imperative (SLI) position paper generated in 1994 by the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). In it, Paul Bloland, a member of the blue-ribbon committee that developed the document, discusses student affairs' historical goal of reunifying the extracurriculum and the academic curriculum into an educational paradigm that sees student learning as occurring both in and out of the formal classroom. The SLI, therefore, can be viewed as the most recent of many such attempts to emphasize this enhanced view of the nature of collegiate learning. The principles of the SLI are briefly summarized together with some suggestions for implementing these principles on the local campus.

UNDERSTANDING ACPA'S STUDENT LEARNING IMPERATIVE

Paul A. Bloland
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(Paper delivered for the Senior Scholar panel: The Student Learning Imperative: Implications for Practice" at the National Convention of the American College Personnel Association in Baltimore, Maryland, March 9, 1996)

Good morning and welcome to "The Student Learning Imperative: Implications for Practice." My name is Paul Bloland and I am the coordinating presenter of this convention program, one of two programs sponsored by and featuring the Senior Scholars of the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). Parenthetically, the Senior Scholars are individuals who have contributed substantially during their professional careers in higher education to the literature (research, philosophy, theory) related to the practice of student affairs, college student development, or higher education administration.

You may recognize the name and the intellectual contributions of the four Senior Scholars present with me here this morning:

Marcia Baxter-Magolda is currently Professor of Educational Leadership at Miami University of Ohio, teaching in its master's program in college student personnel. She is well-known for her research on the assessment of intellectual development, the role of gender in epistemology, and relational pedagogy.

Richard Caple is Professor of Education and Director of the Counseling Center at the University of Missouri, Columbia. He was formerly the editor of ACPA Developments and then served as editor of the Journal of College Student Development for many years. He is one of the few people in the American College

Personnel Association to have been named to both of the Association's highest awards: The Outstanding Professional Service Award, now the Esther Lloyd-Jones Award, in 1987 and the Contribution to Knowledge Award in 1994.

Annette Gibbs is Professor of Higher Education and Director of the Center for the Study of Higher Education located at the University of Virginia. She has long been interested in student affairs programming and administration in higher education and the legal relationship between students and their institutions.

Cynthia Johnson is Professor of Educational Psychology and Administration and coordinator of the master's program in Student Development in Higher Education at California State Unversity--Long Beach. Her primary scholarly focus has been on the practice, literature, and dissemination of computer technology in postsecondary and adult career development. A former ACPA president, she was named in 1993 as the first recipient of the Esther Lloyd-Jones Outstanding Professional Service Award.

My task this morning is to set the stage for the panel presentations. I will begin by reviewing the background and basic principles of the Student Learning Imperative (SLI) (American College Personnel Association, 1994).

The Student Learning Imperative has received considerable attention and has invoked important discussion in the student affairs professional community. The stated purpose of the document was to "stimulate discussion and debate on how student affairs professionals can intentionally create the conditions that enhance student learning and personal development" (p. 1).

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"Stimulate discussion and debate..." it did and it now seems appropriate to give attention to how student affairs professionals can translate into practice the ideas and models that have already emerged. This panel presentation will focus on the experiences of the presenters in applying these ideas to practice.

The Student Learning Imperative document grew out of the presidential address by ACPA President Charles Schroeder during the 1993 ACPA Convention in Kansas City. In his address, Dr. Schroeder sounded a clarion call for student affairs to rejoin the rest of the higher education community and focus again on student learning, to join with our faculty colleagues in affecting the definition and nature of higher education. As Dr. Schroeder pointed out,

> Focusing on student learning is certainly not a new or radical notion. The philosophical foundation of our profession--The Student Personnel Point of View [American Council on Education, 1937, 1949]--viewed students as learners. I am simply suggesting that we return to our roots, to our espoused values, to our deeply held convictions about students and that we commit now to focusing our efforts on student learning. (p. 11)

Dr. Schroeder's approach was fueled by the many reports on the status of higher education that had been emerging since 1984 (Association of American Colleges, 1985; Study Group of the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, 1984; Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993), and that had clearly spelled out student learning as the imperative for this decade. He suggested that "student learning is the central focus of higher education and it provides the common ground on which

academic affairs and student affairs can speak with a unified voice" (p. 11). He went on to say that "By focusing on student learning, student affairs can become interwoven with the fabric of the academy, bring integration and coherence to a traditionally fragmented, compartmentalized and often random approach to achieving important educational outcomes" (p. 11).

Following the Kansas City Convention, President Schroeder followed up on his initiative with the appointment of a blue-ribbon committee that included Alexander Astin, Helen Astin, Paul Bloland, Patricia Cross, James Hurst, George Kuh, Theodore Marchese, Elizabeth Nuss, Ernest Pascarella, Anne Pruitt, Michael Rooney, and Charles Schroeder. The committee met for three days of intense discussion in the heady elevation of Estes Park, Colorado at Schroeder's mountain retreat and came up with the initial draft of the document. The final document was developed by George Kuh with input from members of the committee and many others.

The Student Learning Imperative should be read as simply the most recent chapter in higher education's long quest for the philosophical integration of the collegiate undergraduate experience into a learning paradigm that sees both the curriculum and the extracurriculum as learning experiences. The SLI acknowledges the contribution of student development theory, but still recognizes that intellectual pursuits are at the heart of the mission of higher education.

This re-emphasis on student learning should not in any way be interpreted as endorsing a return to the sterile Germanic

intellectualism of post-Colonial United States history. There was no intent to slight in any way the longtime commitment of student affairs to its own holistic approach to higher education --that student learning embraces a wide variety of experiences and outcomes, both curricular and cocurricular. The concern of the field of student affairs with the education of the whole student and the optimum development of the individual has long been a cornerstone of the student affairs movement and has been one of our major contributions to the evolving definition of higher education in America.

The historical role of student affairs in higher education has not only been one of providing services to students via the out-of-class domain but also of seeking to validate itself as a profession that contributes more than routine administrative services. Student affairs has long sought to be recognized by the campus as a partner in the educational enterprise as well. Its justification has been a philosophy that views collegiate education in a wider framework than the academic classroom, one that has pushed for unifying the curriculum and extracurriculum into an educational paradigm that sees students as learning from their experiences, both cognitive and affective, both within and outside of the formal classroom.

In a sense, then, the history of change in higher education may not be so much evolutionary as it resembles the swinging of a pendulum as Brubacher and Rudy put it in their fine history of higher education in America (1976,p. 330). That pendulum is again swinging as the Student Learning Imperative attempts to

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move the focus of the student affairs field into a closer alignment with student learning and the educational mission.

Now let's take a look at the six basic principles that were enunciated in the SLI about higher education and student affairs:

1. The hallmarks of a college-educated person include: complex cognitive skills; the capability of applying knowledge to practical problems; an understanding of individual differences; practical competencies; and a clear sense of identity, confidence, integrity, civic responsibility, etc.

2. The concepts of "learning," "personal development," and "student development" are interwoven and indivisible.

3. Experiences in class and out of class, on and off the campus, contribute to student learning and personal development.

4. Learning and personal development occur through the interrelationships developed between people, physical space, and socio-cultural environments.

5. Knowledge and understanding are critical to student success and institutional improvement.

6. "Student affairs people are educators who share responsibility with faculty, administrators, staff, and students for creating the conditions under which students are likely to spend time in educationally-purposeful activities" (p. 2).

The Student Learning Imperative document than asks the next and logical question: If a student affairs organization or division were to take the SLI seriously, how would it go about implementing it locally?

1. The student affairs division's mission would complement the university's mission, with the student affairs programs and services devoted to enhancing student learning and personal development.

2. Funds and staff resources would be allocated specifically to encourage student learning and personal development.

3. Collaboration with other agencies, faculty, and off-campus groups, in the promotion of student learning with personal development becoming an important goal.

4. Student affairs staff, with administrative encouragement, would become experts on students, campus environments, and on the teaching-learning process.

5. Programs and policies designed to promote student learning would be based upon research on student learning and upon institutional data.

As this panel presentation was being assembled, the Journal of College Student Development, under the guest editorship of Charles Schroeder, published a special issue on the implications of the SLI for the practice of student affairs, much the same objective we are addressing this morning. This special issue (Schroeder, 1996) featured extended discussion and interpretation of the SLI by many members of the original blue-ribbon committee whose ideas and insights have contributed to our understanding of undergraduate education and student development.

As I have pointed out, the Student Learning Imperative is yet another attempt to bring about a reunification of the

academic and the out-of-class activities of students so that as faculty and staff plan the scope and nature of the student learning experience, the full resources available in the college or university are utilized in implementing the institution's learning mission. As the SLI puts it, "Student affairs professionals attempt to make 'seamless' what are often perceived by students to be disjointed, unconnected experiences..." (p. 3).

With this background we are now ready to hear from our panel members. As we put this program together, participants were requested to show how the principles of the SLI have been or could be implemented on the campus by means of their particular disciplinary or student service interest.

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